

## The Aesthetic Idea as the Essence of the Aesthetic

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**Abstract:** This paper suggests that Kant's concept of the 'aesthetic idea' is a useful starting point for understanding the nature of aesthetic experience once we reject the formalist interpretation that Kant gives to the relationship between those ideas and that experience.

**Keywords:** aesthetic experience, art, Kant.

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Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* is not a work about art. Today, although there is perhaps less need to emphasize this point than there was even a decade ago, it is still a point worth making. It is worth making because Kant's work continues to be considered a key text within the field of aesthetics, even while this field, as an academic discipline, has become overwhelmingly a matter of the philosophy of art (see Kirwan, 2012). Aesthetics and the philosophy of art should, of course, be discrete areas of inquiry: having an experience of art is neither a necessary nor even a sufficient condition for having an aesthetic experience. Aesthetic experience is entirely personal and fleeting; art is a class of objects in the world. Thus, since one cannot define experiences in terms of objects, nor (shared) objects in terms of (individual) experiences, there is probably nothing that is generally true about either aesthetic experience or art that is also generally true about both.

There was, nevertheless, an awkward period of several generations during which aesthetics, as an academic discipline, became, in practice, the philosophy of art, while at the same time the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* continued to be regarded as a key text within the discipline. (Possibly if the work had been written by someone less prestigious than Kant this would not have been the case.) This was to some extent possible so long as "art" remained an evaluative term, and a "genuine" experience of art was posited as a particular kind of experience, though these practices themselves were obviously philosophically untenable. During the period when such discourse prevailed, Kant's work was very much associated with the formalist theory of art. This is unsurprising, given that his account of the aesthetic experiences of beauty and sublimity is, in its explicit rejection of a role for individual psychology, a formalist account.<sup>1</sup>

This kind of formalism was regularly offered, particularly in the early twentieth century, as explanatory of "what art does". Part of the reason for this was, of course, the feeling that the positive experience of art is an end in itself: a feeling that leaves the philosopher with the conundrum, also at the heart of ethics, of accounting for a non-instrumental value. Nevertheless, while there are artforms to which some kind of formalism seems peculiarly applicable, such as architecture, abstract painting, and music, and without denying that purely formal qualities (like symmetry) can be a significant source of aesthetic effect within

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<sup>1</sup> While Kant's theories of beauty and the mathematical sublime are obviously formalist, his account of the dynamic sublime, insofar as the experience depends on the individual subject's *idea* of the overwhelming, has a psychological element that allows for a less formalistic description of what is happening, though, internally, the source of the effect can ultimately be resolved to the same mechanism as the mathematical sublime.

art, it is clear that such formal qualities cannot exhaust the aesthetic effects of art, even with architecture, abstract painting, or music. Moreover, once we move to artforms that are more obviously a matter of narrative, it becomes clear that formalism gives us almost nothing to say about the work – or, at least, nothing that is likely to be germane to the work in its particularity.

However, having asserted that Kant's account of aesthetic experience, as an account of aesthetic experience, is not particularly relevant to the concerns of modern philosophical aesthetics, as the philosophy of art, there is, I believe, one concept he discusses that is, nevertheless, particularly pertinent to the aesthetic experience of art, insofar as that experience is the experience of a stable, public/shared object. This concept is that of the 'aesthetic idea' (*ästhetischer Ideen*).

I will only briefly outline what I take Kant's concept of the aesthetic idea to be, since I am anxious that this paper should *not* become about the interpretation of Kant. Therefore, if you find yourself violently disagreeing with the way in which Kant is interpreted here, I would ask you to imagine that every time I say "Kant's concept of such and such", what I am really saying is "my concept of such and such". In this way, we can concentrate on the concept itself, regardless of its provenance.

Kant introduces the concept of aesthetic ideas to account for the way in which beauty can be, despite what he has hitherto said regarding its non-psychological character, sometimes dependent on concepts. It can be dependent on concepts, he claims, without actually being *determined* by a definite concept. An aesthetic idea, according to Kant, is that representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, any *concept*, to be adequate to it, and which, consequently, no language can render fully intelligible (Kant, 2000, p. 192). Such representations of the imagination may be termed "ideas", according to Kant, insofar as they have some semblance to objective reality, that is, they „at least strive toward something lying beyond the bounds of experience, and thus seek to approximate a presentation of concepts of reason (of intellectual ideas)“ (Kant, 2000, p. 192). Such ideas of the imagination become aesthetic ideas when they prompt so great a wealth of associations as to defy comprehension in a definite concept:

„[In] this case the imagination is creative, and sets the faculty of intellectual ideas (reason) into motion, that is, at the instigation of a representation it gives more to think about than can be grasped and made distinct in it (although it does, to be sure, belong to the concept of the object)... [The] aesthetic idea is a representation of the imagination, associated with a given concept, which is combined with such a manifold of partial representations in the free use of the imagination that no expression designating a determinate concept can be found for it, which therefore allows the addition to a concept of much that is unnameable, the feeling of which animates the cognitive faculties and combines spirit [Geist] with the mere letter of language“ (Kant, 2000, pp. 193-94).

Kant gives the particular example of language as a form which can be infused with 'spirit' at the end of the previous quotation because this passage occurs in the course of a consideration of a poem by Frederick the Great. It is in poetry, according to Kant that „the faculty of aesthetic ideas can reveal itself in its full measure“ (Kant, 2000, p. 193). This is unsurprising, given that literature is the most obviously conceptual of the arts, its very material (language) being inescapably symbolic. However, any object that is capable of sustaining a symbolic interpretation, that is, any object, might be the object of an aesthetic idea.

That the aesthetic idea cannot be resolved into a definite concept that can be expressed in language explains why Kant later claims that art can only be beautiful if it *appears* as nature. If all that we discern in a

work of art is the intention to produce a definite concept that could be expressed otherwise, then that work, while perhaps it may appeal to our reason, cannot be said to be making an appeal to our aesthetic sense, to our sense of what art is for. To do this, it must appear to us that the pleasure or sadness, or sense of profundity that we feel is attributable to that object as an object devoid of any specific end. (In the case of art, this is precisely the sense of art's value that is captured in the expression "art for art's sake", literally meaningless as that phrase is). Our estimate of the object, even if we are aware that it is not made independently of any concept, must nevertheless appear to be a response to something in excess of that conceptual element: the effect must be greater than the sum of the parts. This excess will appear to the subject, paradoxically, as something less than a concept, that is, as the "superficial form" of the object, the object in itself: this order of words, these colours, these lines. Thus, though we remain intellectually aware that the object (as a product of art) and its properties were humanly intended, if the object actually succeeds in moving us it does so only insofar as this intellectual awareness comes to appear irrelevant, that is, insofar as the object appears, like nature, to be devoid of a definite end with respect to our response.<sup>2</sup>

I think there is something intuitively correct about this idea of a host of associations approximating to concepts but irreducible to concepts, and, therefore, as Kant says, ultimately resistant to the explicable. Much of what we say about art, particularly about the way in which it "speaks to us" in a way that we cannot translate, makes sense in terms of this concept of aesthetic ideas. What, however, is unconvincing in Kant's account is the idea that it is merely the animation of the cognitive faculties through the exercise of following a host of irresolvable representations of the imagination that is responsible for the way in which we value the experience. That is, what is unconvincing is the formalistic account of how aesthetic ideas lead to aesthetic feeling. No doubt there are experiences, the pleasure of which could be explained this way, but the experience of art is not one of them.

What I would suggest is that it is the *content* of the representations of the imagination involved that is responsible for the aesthetic experience. This is not to say that a definite concept is involved, but only that it is not the irresolvable interplay of just *any* representations of the imagination that leads to aesthetic experience. That is, the interplay of concepts is irresolvable not because those concepts are the fluid result of the wealth of associations created by the elements of the work but rather because those concepts are such that we resist their resolution in a definite concept: we do not wish to acknowledge what the work "says". My reasons for believing this is so are, ironically enough, formalistic. For, while the concept of aesthetic ideas has much to recommend it, and appears to account for a great deal of the peculiar nature of aesthetic experience, it does also contain the weakness previously mentioned. That is, it would make aesthetic experience something akin to simply being "mentally occupied", and it would make the pleasure of, for example, comedy and tragedy, the same pleasure.

It is quite clear that concepts are involved in the experience of art. Indeed, this is what criticism is supposed to be for: to say what the work wants to say. (Even at its best, criticism is trying to say how the work made you feel the way you felt, and this is always a matter of concepts.) What is interesting, however, is that no one, except desperate students, has ever thought that criticism was a substitute for a first-hand encounter with the work. Within criticism, I may say that I admire this work because it is profound, and even that its profundity lies in its expressing this or that proposition, in this or that way, about the world (or that it is exciting, or graceful, or funny, or tragic, and so on, because it possesses these

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<sup>2</sup> Kant's point here finds obvious confirmation in the way in which such epithets as "contrived", "manipulative", "obvious", and so on, are so readily used as terms of aesthetic condemnation. As soon as we become conscious of a work's intention to move us, it ceases to do so. It must be the story itself, the image itself, that moves us.

or those properties), yet there is still something in the experience which leads me to attribute my pleasure or admiration to the object itself. That is, we feel that the idea somehow justifies our pleasure or admiration, and may indeed even assert a necessary connection between the two, yet, ultimately we can neither point to an objective principle, nor the satisfaction of a universally intersubjective desire, that would establish such a necessary connection. The “truth” we might find is never one that can be lifted out of the work and continue to do the same job that the work does.

It is for this reason that I would suggest that the imaginative representations we are entertaining when we are having a positive aesthetic experience of a work are such that they give rise to ideas that *we do not wish* to resolve into definite concepts. I would further suggest that we would not wish to resolve them into definite concepts, and criticism never succeeds in doing so, because they are concepts we could not continue to entertain if we made them explicit to ourselves; they are concepts that, given their wish-fulfilling nature, could not survive the light of day.

Art, then, where it succeeds for an audience, is a way for that audience to entertain certain ideas without having to entertain those ideas as rational concepts. Works mean, but what they mean always seems to exceed what we can say of their meaning. This is not because such meaning is by nature ineffable but rather because, for the sake of that meaning, we are unwilling to reduce the aesthetic ideas to definite concepts, since to do so would make the wish-fulfilling nature of those ideas or of their interplay explicit, and render us incapable of entertaining them as ideas about real possibilities. It is not, then, as Dante said, that art is a ‘beautiful lie’ (*una bella menzogna*) than conceals an important truth, but rather than art is an acknowledged lie, a fiction (beautiful or otherwise), that conceals a beautiful lie (Dante, 1903, p. 63).

Such a conclusion, however, can be misleading if not put into context. It is too easy to think of life and art as antonyms. (Perhaps never more so, indeed, than when one starts to think of one’s life as a work of art.) Art is, of course, something that may be contrasted with life – the fictional versus the real – insofar as it is something that is encountered within a life, set apart from everything else by the frame that makes it art. Aesthetic experience, however, is neither coterminous with works of art, nor even with what we designate “aesthetic experience”. The discrete aesthetic experience, such as one might have in connection with, among other things, a work of art, always takes place within a continuum of experience that is already aesthetic. What I mean here by “aesthetic” is what that word has meant throughout this essay: an experience in which what makes our encounter with an object, whether real (for example, an artwork) or imaginary (for example, a memory), significant to us, that is, actually part of experience, is the *unacknowledged* symbolic meaning of that object. We are, of course, quite ready to expand the compass of the aesthetic, in this sense, beyond the rather narrow field of what is actually covered by aesthetics as a philosophical discipline: for example, to everyday design, objects of consumption, sex, religion, politics, and so on. However, this domain of what makes life meaningful needs to be expanded further: to our morality, our attachments, our goals, the very narrative sense of our life that makes it “our” life.<sup>3</sup> At this point, of course, unless one is committed to the idea of some irreducible, non-contingent core of individuality (a soul, for example), it becomes clear that the use of “our” is becoming untenable. What is being described is actually everything we are: there is no “I” aside from these things. That is, to say that there is an “I” that is experiencing these things is to introduce one more entity than is required. Rather it is the accumulated experiencing of these things that constitutes an “I”. This “I” may, of course, have discrete aesthetic experiences of the artwork/sunset type, that is, aesthetic experiences in which it is aware

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, even physical experience, which we are inclined to believe is exclusively a matter of the senses, can be largely aesthetic in character: see Rousseau (1998, p. 324).

that it is “having an aesthetic experience” (perhaps because the object is not so embedded in a context of *specific* desires as are the objects of the rest of its experience), but it does so only against the background of the rest of its ineluctably aesthetic experience.

It is also necessary to note that aesthetic experience, as defined above, does not always have a positive character: feelings of, for example, disgust, boredom, or depression are also clearly a matter of experiencing the world aesthetically. To say that our sense of life is inescapably aesthetic is not, then, to say that life is invariably a source of pleasure.<sup>4</sup>

If we take these two factors together – the fundamentally aesthetic quality of our experience per se and the way in which the aesthetic can be as much a pain as a pleasure – it becomes clear why those positive aesthetic experiences that we are conscious of as “aesthetic experience” have the value they have. It is not the case that the ‘beautiful lie’ of art can be contrasted with the plain fact of life as it is, since there is, for us, no plain fact of life as it is. Moreover, there will never be a sense of life that is “true”, since all senses of life, all symbolic interpretations of the world around us, will always be driven by a desire for the impossible, and thus will always contain their own negation. What the discrete, acknowledged, aesthetic experience does is alter the aesthetic sense of life we already have. (This is also the reason it is experienced as discrete.) The extent to which it does so is also the basis of the kind of value we place on that experience. Hence the difference in the way we experience those works that simply pass the time by distracting us from the burden of our existing aesthetic sense of life, those that reinforce an existing sense that presently satisfies us, and those that move us profoundly, that, as we say, “make us see the world differently”. It is the last kind to which we normally attribute “truth” (though truth about what we cannot say), since it is these that have moved us by somehow demonstrating to us the falsity of our previous aesthetic sense of existence. They have, in short, replaced an ugly lie with a beautiful one: a restricted and unhappy sense of life with a sense of life’s plenitude, its possibilities, or its possible significance. This happens even though we were not aware – as, indeed, we cannot be – that our previous sense was a restricted one. We love the art that can make life more liveable.

That all this happens, and indeed can only happen, without our conscious acknowledgement that it is happening, explains why the topic of aesthetics is essentially the question of how to account for the experience of an object as possessing non-instrumental value, as being the source of “disinterested pleasure”. Kant’s notion of the ‘aesthetic idea’, shorn of that rejection of the psychological that follows from the demands of Kant’s larger critical project rather than from the topic itself, is a useful starting point for answering this question.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> There are as many potential pitfalls involved in using “aesthetic” as an evaluative word as there were in using “art” as one.

<sup>5</sup> For Kant’s rejection of psychology, see Kirwan (2004, pp. 51-52; 145).

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